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The local political elites in East-Central Europe: Between the legacy of the past and the decentralization of the present

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Abstract

The present paper is concerned with the issue of local leadership in the countries of East-Central Europe. Concretely, it constitutes an attempt at examining the outlook, *i.e.* the profile and the role, of the local political elites in East-Central Europe, with a special emphasis on small-to-medium sized communities. The main argument put forward is that the disparities in the outlook and priorities of the local political elites are to be explained through a combination between the different inheritance of the communist *ancien régime*, at the level of “elite political culture” (Kowitt 1990) and the present challenges imposed by various degrees of decentralization. For the purpose of exemplifying the inquiry into the local political elites of the region and for further exploring the topic on the two dimensions, the paper employs the comparative approach of “quality-based profile” (Prewitt, 1970) constructed by the members of the Municipal Councils in Tecuci (Romania), Česká Lípa (the Czech Republic), Oleśnica (Poland), and Targovishte (Bulgaria). Hence, the study uses five models of the “ideal portrait” of the local councilor: ethical, pragmatic, technocratic, political, and gender. According to the results of a study applying a standard written questionnaire among the local councilors of the three communities in the period December 2010-February 2013, the paper distinguishes among three corresponding types of local elites: (1) “predominantly elitistic”, (2) “democratic elitist”, and (3) “predominantly democratic”, following two types of explanation accounting for the differences among the four cases: the legacy of the defunct regime and the degree of administrative decentralization.

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1. Theoretical assessments. On the study of local political elites

The literature dedicated to the study of local political elites is impressively reduced: the bulk of this literature derives from the broad study of political elites and consequently dates from the 1970s, once with the climax reached by the elitist empirical studies. In this respect, the most frequently quoted, the renowned *oeuvre* pertains to Robert Dahl who constructed its poliarchic model on the study of the municipality of New Haven. Among the most prominent studies on the slippery and feeble soil of local political elites, the mentionable titles are the pioneering works authored by Robert Staughton and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition* (1937), undertaken in Muncie (Indiana). Despite the anthropological overload of their volumes, it is important to bear in mind that the two American scholars were among the first to endeavor in such an inductively-driven urban inquiry, and the first to consider the impact of economic changes and development strategies on various segments of the town's population, including the leading *strata* of the community, on these segments' values and behaviors. Lynds' work is equally significant for it paves the way for Dahl's future observations, stressing on the relevance of power – even in the very confined, narrow space of a small town – and on the place of economic notables in Muncie, the “businessmen”, on their conspicuous influence upon the political leadership of the town and on the entire activity and life of the urban community. From the prism of these conclusions, when discussing the “Middletown Studies”, Nelson Polsby (1963, p. 14) labels them as “Marxist” (for they contend that property among the means of production provides for absolute power within a municipality) and the representatives of the “stratification theory” in elitist studies, for they ultimately reach the conclusion that the local elite is the one that possess political power – usually springing from other form of power exerted at the local level, e.g. economical –, as an instrument for governing the community in accordance to its own vernacular interests. Illustrative for the cases selected here (particularly for the Romanian case), although they stress on the “net separation” between the economical institutions and the political ones, even at the local level, the Lynds do acknowledge the immanent interdependence between the two institutions and leadership, since “those that dominate from an economic standpoint the community exert their control on the political problems, as well, only to avoid the too accentuated increase in taxation or a too strong involvement in their own affairs [by the political leadership]. Otherwise, they are totally disinterested in the political life.” (Lynds, 1937, p. 129) This assessment might appear yet too hazardous, taking into consideration the frequency and the intensity of interactions and network formation between the political and the economic elites; a series of tentative evaluations somehow antagonizing with Lynds' conclusion are drawn from the present study, but, while the American study is focused on Muncie in the 1920s and 1930s, the present study is extremely contingent on four towns in East-Central Europe in 2010-2013, making hence opposite views and results virtually irreconcilable for the simple fact that the two studies are circumscribed to particular instances, settings and time frames, with no pretence to exhaustive generalizations. As a matter of fact, the Lynds' studies on “Middletown” and their feeble conclusions in respect to the connections between economic and political elite at the local level (dominantly in urban areas) opened the way for similar, more mature and more meaningful empirical endeavors oriented towards the analysis of the said connections and of their impact on the developmental strategies and the general profile of the urban communities; notable in this sense is William Lloyd Warner's study on “Yankee City” (Newburyport, Massachusetts) (Warner & Lunt, 1941; Warner & Lunt, 1942; Warner & Strole, 1945; Warner & Low, 1947; Warner, 1959; Warner, 1963), the hypothetical urban center dominated by entrepreneurs, businessmen, freelancers and liberal professionals, who managed to forge a sort of “class consciousness” and who virtually ousted any trace of autonomy from the political institutions. Surely, such a stance is too vehement and radical, since it implies the blunt reality that, at the local level, the economic elite is the one that ultimately governs in town. Notwithstanding his categorical positions, Warner and his work on “Yankee City” are to be kept in mind when endeavoring in the thin and narrow field of local political leadership at least from two perspectives: firstly, his observations are heavily utilized and partly confirmed – albeit in a nuanced form – by the present research, which point to the pertinence and contemporaneity thereof; secondly, he employs a singular method, that of an “index of evaluated participation” (i.e. the construction of a scale comprising the expertise's evaluation of the “prestige” enjoyed by key-individuals within the community, and their placing on the social hierarchy), quite similar to Hunter's method (presented below and further utilized, as well, in this study), which stresses and manages somehow to operationalize the concept of elite “prestige”. Soon after Warner's “Yankee City” studies had known scholarly recognition, Floyd Hunter advanced a resembling work, conducted in “Regional City” (different researches in

Atlanta and Georgia) among the members of the local upper class (Hunter, Schaffer & Sheps, 1956). Hunter's findings are strikingly similar to Warner's: as in "Yankee City", in "Regional City", "the businessmen are the leaders of the community [...], as they actually are in any town. The wealth, the social prestige and the political machinery are functional to the wielding of power by these leaders." (Hunter, 1953, p. 81) In confronting dilemmas of "prestige" and "reputation" of local notables, Hunter contends that "their visual influence [and virtual recognition] is transformed into power". Yet again, the study is diverged towards the economic portions of the ruling class, while the local political elite is completely overshadowed by the magnitude of the reputation the businessmen possess. The emphasis on the predominance and preeminence of the economic elite on local decision-making and on its "caste" behavior are furthered in Delbert Miller's inquiry into "Pacific City", although this time the scholar minds about the political decision-makers, as well, mentioning their role as mere "counterbalance" for the interests of local big business (Miller, 1985, pp. 9-15, esp. pp. 13-15). If C. Wright Mills is central for the "positional method", Warner and Hunter are exemplary for the "reputational method", Robert Dahl's *Poliarchy* and *Who Governs ?* (1961) are the referential works for the "decisional method" in analyzing elites: the research in New Haven (Connecticut) revealed that those who hold the political power are essentially that quite exclusive group of individuals who take a decision, *i.e.* who initiates a proposition and who subsequently validates or opposes it. Definitely, the scope of Dahl's study is laudable, as his primary intention was to provide a rejoinder to both Marxist and elitist interpretations on local politics and to somehow "rehabilitate" the traditional image and model of the American democracy – even at the local level – as veritably democratic and integral, hence refuting Mills's, Warner's and Hunter's "invitations" to perceiving national and local elites as some sort of complotistic and clandestine caste. Dahl's elites are factionalist, fragmentary, placed in a continuous fight for the control over society (similar to the struggle between "lions" and "foxes" in Pareto's accounts); it is their meeting and their subsequent negotiations in the decision-making process that actually matters in describing elites. Surely, these factional leaders and groups do agree on the very basis of the "rules of the democratic game" and on the accountability of the citizens, making "poliarchy" probably the best "approximation" of democracy. On the other hand, the observations drawn from the small town of New Haven conclude: the central position of the Mayor, who participates to decision-making in all spheres of competence; the extreme specialization of the elite group; the absence of economic elites in the process of decision-making at the local level (with the partial exception of decisions taken in the sphere of urban development), etc. Notwithstanding the importance of and the central role played by these works in the general scholarly evolution of the local elite studies, quite unfortunately, few of them concentrated their attention on the composition of the Municipal Council as legislative centers of power at the local level, particularly within small-to-medium sized communities.

2. Theoretical and methodological framework: Explaining variations in local leadership in ECE

The present study advances a threefold classification of local political leadership, constructed employing mainly two explanatory trajectories, one of the being discussed at some length here: (a) the level of administrative-fiscal decentralization specific for each of the countries under scrutiny, and (2) the "legacy" of the former communist regime, expressed through the type of "elite political culture" (Jowitt, 1999). For the level of administrative-fiscal decentralization, although the paper acknowledges the importance of various other forms of decentralization (vertical, decision-making, appointment, electoral, fiscal, personnel – Treisman, 2002; administrative *v.* political; territorial *v.* technical – Apostol Tofan, 2008; vertical *v.* horizontal; functional *v.* territorial – Stoica, 2003; internal *v.* external), it favors a rather reductionist approach on fiscal, expenditure-based decentralization. For this purpose, it employs the average indexes of decentralization currently utilized by the World Bank and the IMF in the issuing of their annual reports[†], operationalizing "decentralization" as the subnational share of general government

[†] Along a series of domains of considerable interest at the local level (infrastructure, education, healthcare, public security, transportation, social services (including housing and unemployment relief), cultural and recreational activities, etc.), it evaluates the extent to which they are dealt with nationally, regionally and locally. This evaluation is constructed primarily based on pieces of legislation, bylaws, internal regulations of different administrative and executive bodies, as well as on some empirical endeavors undertaken by the World Bank and the IMF expertise.

expenditure. In order to properly account for the differences in the level of fiscal-administrative decentralization among the four cases, this paper adds to these indexes three thresholds, thusly: (a) a significant level of administrative and fiscal decentralization describes the countries whose average subnational share of general expenditure is higher than 50%; (b) a standard level of decentralization is specific for those countries with an average local and regional share of general government expenditure is higher than 30%, but lower than 50%; and (c) a low level of decentralization characterizes the countries with a subnational share of general government expenditure lower than 30%.

	Public order & Safety	Education	Health	Social Security & Welfare	Housing & Communal Amenities	Recreation & Culture	Transportation & Communication	Average
BULGARIA	2.17	59.53	44.11	8.30	68.95	26.69	12.19	31.70%
CZECH REPUBLIC	17.20	17.22	5.98	8.03	68.47	61.89	46.53	32.18%
BULGARIA	6.86	46.99	44.83	11.99	74.10	43.97	27.64	36.62%
POLAND	34.30	72.47	87.36	17.49	86.92	76.13	65.34	62.85%
ROMANIA	4.80	9.23	0.36	2.97	83.01	34.74	17.55	21.80%
SLOVAKIA	5.69	2.40	0.26	0.49	56.74	27.00	18.78	15.90%

Table no. 1. The proportion of subnational share of general government expenditure (expressed as percentage from the total national budget).
(Source: International Monetary Fund, *Government Finance Statistics Yearbook*, IMF, Washington, D.C., 2001. The data is selected only for the countries of East-Central Europe, former satellites of USSR.)

Conclusively, (a) for the significant level of fiscal-administrative decentralization, the Polish case is exponential; (b) the standard level of decentralization fits the Czech and the Bulgarian cases, whereas (c) the low level of decentralization is specific to the Romanian case. Recent studies have shown the impact of decentralization *formulae* on the outlook and the role of local political elites. Such an empirical concern has been focused primarily on Latin America, South Asia (Beard, Miraftab, & Silver, 2008; Smoke, Gómez, & Peterson, 2006; Burki, Perry, & Dillinger, 1999; Escobar-Lemmon, 2003; Bardhan, 2002; Garman, Haggard, & Willis, 2001; Falleti, 2005 etc.), and Africa (Cottingham, 1970), while the topic has been generally neglected for the developing democracies of East-Central Europe. Dora Orlansky (2000, p. 196) discusses the impact of decentralization upon the power-sharing between the central and the local administrative layers and upon the extent of political power and responsibility local elites are expected to exert. Discussing a series of examples from Africa and South Asia, Devarajan *et al.* (2009, p. 118-119) refer to the dangers of elite isolation with the increase in decentralized communities and to shifts in delivery of public services once with the process of decentralization. Quite interestingly, Merilee S. Grindle (2007, p. 63-105) introduces the example of decentralization in Mexico, concluding that proper fiscal and administrative decentralization can result in high levels of political competition and satisfaction with the living in the town, both at the level of the local elites and the community. It becomes apparent that local leadership modifies its outlook and prioritization strategy in the context of change of administrative organization leading to increased decentralization. Jonathan Rodden (2004) presents the impact of different forms of decentralization upon the city management, but, most importantly, upon the degree of elite isolation and passive representation. Finally, opposing two main approaches in reference to the impact of decentralization policies – the “liberal-individualist” and “statist” approaches –, Aylin Topal (2012) describes forms of elite isolation after the proper implementation of decentralization policies and differences of agenda setting of local elites as response to increased decentralization. The fashion in which the elites’ outlook, value orientation and strategy prioritization actually modifies is partially elaborated in the present paper, with a special focus on particular municipalities in four countries of East-Central Europe: Romania, Czech Republic, Poland, and Bulgaria.

The levels of decentralization may impact the drafting of policy agenda at the local level, the strategy prioritization, the degree of elite isolation (*i.e.* the insistence on contacts and interactions confined to the governed municipality), some of the value-orientations, etc. Hence, it is expected that a significant level of decentralization

would exhibit an equally high degree of elite isolation and would induce an orientation towards the so-called “hard” spheres of activities (e.g. public improvements, infrastructure, economic development, public order, etc.), a considerable degree of political responsibility and responsiveness, and the identification with a rather “pragmatic” and “technocratic” elite profile. On the other hand, it might be easily hypothesized that low levels of decentralization can only result in a geographically open elite, in a focus on rather “soft” spheres of activity and a policy prioritization accordingly (e.g. education, healthcare, culture, youth and recreation activities, etc.), due to a perceived impotence of implementing change locally and a resulting low level of political responsibility, and the construction of an elite profile concentrated on “ethical” and “political” models. The second explanatory trajectory refers to the legacy of the *ancien régime*. In order to operationalize this complex variable, this study utilizes the differentiation operated by Kitschelt *et al.* (1999) between three types of communist dictatorship in the countries of former Sovietized Europe: (1) “national accommodative” communist dictatorship (e.g. Poland and Hungary), (2) “bureaucratic authoritarian” or “welfare” communist dictatorship (Jarausch, 1999) (e.g. Czechoslovakia and East Germany), and (3) “patrimonial” or “modernizing-nationalizing” communist dictatorship (Petrescu, 2010) (e.g. Romania and Bulgaria).

Depending on the type of communist dictatorship faced by each of the four societies under scrutiny here, the elite developed a certain form of “political culture”[‡], remnant features of which have been traduced, reproduced or preserved outright during the transition and the period of democratic consolidation. The study favors Jowitt’s collocation “elite political culture”[§] (1992, pp. 51-52, and 54-56) to refer to those attitudinal and behavioral traits inherited from the *ancien régime*, conserved from the central to the local level. For instance, a former “patrimonial” regime would result in an increased monolithism of the new political elites, whereas a “bureaucratic-authoritarian” would produce a political elite who is technocratically-oriented. Finally, a “national-accommodative” former regime is prone to generate in contemporaneity an elite who is rather fragmented, factionalist, allowing for opposition, contestation and certain degree of “back-bencherism”, along with a pragmatic attitude in decision-making and profile identification. Moreover, a series of socio-demographical indicators in the elite profile construction are tempered by the nature of the former regime, as is the case, for instance, with the rate of ascendant social mobility, which is generally higher in previously “patrimonial” communist regimes, while decreasing in the case of formerly “bureaucratic-authoritarian” communist dictatorship, where there had existed a small group of “*petite bourgeoisie*”, rather than a large mass of peasants out of which democracy later selected its elites.

[‡] The definition and operationalization of “political culture” have resulted into an overwhelming diversity in understanding. R. Putnam refers to “elite political culture”, defined as some form of attitudinal and behavioral aggregates of the elite group, generally constant, hardly changeable, stable ones; the term accounts for “patterns of beliefs and attitudes [prevalent among the members of the political elite] about the economic, political, social, cultural systems” (Putnam, 1973). In applying the observations drawn from the usage of the concept “elite political culture”, one could only wonder if the four selected groups forming the Municipal Councils of Tecuci, Česká Lipa, Olešnica, and Targovishte have acquired a sense of group consciousness as an elite; such an “elite consciousness” at the local level is difficult to be operationalized and subsequently measured, but some attemptive endeavors employ such indicators as the degree of group cohesion, the acknowledgement of some “special” (*i.e.* specific) traits a local councilor should possess (excepting, of course, the moral dimension which is by no means one of group or *status* differentiation in the case of elites). Actually, though rhetorically catchy and discursively fashionable, the ethical image of the political elite, in the sweet Aristotelian tradition, is an obsolete one, and its obsolescence became conspicuous in the literature as early as the beginning of the 20th century, with the famous works of the Italian “elitists”, the trio Pareto – Mosca – Michels.

[§] “Elite political culture” is “a set of informal adaptive (behavioral and attitudinal) postures that emerge as response to and consequence of a given elite’s identity-forming experiences”. Ken Jowitt (1992) defines “elite political culture” somehow in opposition to what he coins as “regime political culture” (*i.e.* “a set of informal adaptive (behavioral and attitudinal) postures that emerge in response to the institutional definition of social, economic, and political life”) and “community political culture” (*i.e.* “a set of informal adaptive (behavioral and attitudinal) postures that emerge in response to the historical relationships between regime and community”). For Jowitt, the said collocation is actually defined in terms of behavioral analysis of the *ancien régime*: the “political culture” is “the set of informal, adaptive postures – behavioral and attitudinal – that emerge in response to, and interact with, the set of formal definitions – ideological, policy and institutional – that characterize a given level of society.”

3. An application of the twofold variation: the ideal portrait of the local/ municipal councilor (quality-based profile)

In order to exemplify the validity of the twofold explanatory trajectories in the outlook of the local political leaders in ECE – *i.e.* the impact of the level of decentralization and that of the “legacy” of the former communist regime –, the paper employs the examples of the municipal councilors in the four small-to-medium-sized towns used in the previous contribution to this volume (Tecuci in Romania, Česká Lípa in the Czech Republic, Oleśnica in Poland, and Targovishte in Bulgaria). Thus, apart from the value-based profile of the local political elites in the four towns selected (previously constructed on the general attitudes of the local leadership towards values of democracy, the state intervention in economy, the furthering of decentralization process, and the cultural-geographical self-identification), a quality-based profile could be equally scrutinized with the assistance of the projections the local/ municipal councilors build about their public posture, and subsequently explained by the two explanatory trajectories presented above. Hence, the quality-based profile, regarding the (self-constructed) ideal portrait of the local/ municipal councilor, was formed after the gathering of the responses of the members of the four Municipal Councils to the open question: “What are the first five most important qualities a municipal councilor should possess?”. After comprehensively scrutinizing the ones in power, the recent scholarly generally agreed on five models (Prewitt, 1970) that might account for specific “qualities” in defining and identifying elites. The assemblage of these models pledges to the fact that a normative-descriptive reconciliation was intended, although in an overwhelmingly descriptive fashion^{**}. The “ethical model” of political elite refers to such qualities as: correctness, honesty, fairness, altruism, modesty, high moral standards, verticality, courage, bravery. The “technocratic model” of political elite takes into consideration such attributes as: political experience, political will, expertise and training, intelligence, patience/ rapid reaction, enthusiasm and imagination. The “pragmatic model” of political elite is respective to such features as: dedication to the constituency’s (state’s) improvement plans, devotion and respect for the community/ country, desire to change, the capacity to identify development opportunities for the community/ country, vision, perspective, initiative, persuasion skills, capacity to compromise and negotiate, dialog-oriented, intuition, social sensitivity, care for the citizen, economic independence, leadership skills. The “political model” subscribes to the following qualities: oratorical skills, rhetoric, political loyalty, incorruptibility, interest detachment (objectivity), collegiality and team spirit. The “gender model” refers to the gender quality. Therefore, the answers received have been collected under five clusters of qualities – referred here as “models” –, founded on Prewitt’s fivefold quality model of political elites (1970). The quality-based profile is instrumental for both the value attainment of the elite and for such distant matters, such as the patterns of recruitment, degree of interaction with other groups and institutions, level of isolation towards the constituency or in respect to the central elite, the degree of accountability, responsiveness and the mechanisms of strategy prioritization, etc. As a consequence, after the collection of the answers, the following distribution was formed:

- The ethical model (22.65%, for Tecuci; 28.68%, for Česká Lípa; 18.91%, for Oleśnica; 32.23%, for Targovishte);
- The political model (23.98%; 12.93%; 4.05%; 32.23%);
- The technocratic model (9.33%; 21.28%; 18.90%; 10.52%);
- The pragmatic model (21.32%; 37%; 45.9%; 25%);
- The gender model (0% for all cases).

Identifying the qualities that ideally a local councilor should possess and the preference for a specific “model” (set of qualities) is arguably profoundly influenced and explicable by the two independent variables discussed here. It is significant to mention that the distribution of the qualities along the five models in each of the four cases is determined largely of various endogenous and exogenous factors, including, but not limited to: the socio-demographical background of the respondents, the patterns of recruitment according to which they are (s)ected,

^{**} This is particularly the reason why this paper coins the recent (*i.e.* post-Wright-Mills) empirical drive in studying and defining political elites as “neo-descriptive”, since it admits the necessity of introducing the “ethical model”, in spite of the fact that the inquiries are in themselves largely descriptive, exploratory.

the interactions and contacts they establish and entertain, the degree of political-administrative decentralization, the “legacy of the former regime” and its nature, etc.

	Tecuci	Česká Lípa	Olešnica	Targovi shte
Ethical model				
Correctness, honesty, fairness, truthfulness	14.66%	12.03%	12.16%	13.81%
Altruism, selflessness	1.33%		4.05%	3.28%
Modesty	1.33%	1.85%		3.94%
High moral standards, verticality and seriousness, sobriety, personal discipline	5.33%	10.18%	2.7%	10.52%
Courage, bravery		3.7%		0.65%
Punctuality		0.92%		
Technocratic model				
Political experience, political will	5.33%	6.48%		4.60%
Expertise and training	4%	4.62%	2.7%	2.63%
Reliability			5.4%	
Effectiveness, competence			2.7%	1.97%
Intelligence, wisdom		6.48%	4.05%	1.31%
Patience or rapid reaction		1.85%		
Enthusiasm, imagination, creativity, innovation		1.85%	4.05%	
Pragmatic model				
Dedication to the town's improvement plans, devotion, respect for the community, desire to change	12%	8.33%		10.52%
Involvement, diligence, commitment, assertiveness, industry			9.45%	
Determent, consistency, consequence			4.05%	
Thoroughness			1.35%	
The capacity to identify development opportunities for the town (vision, perspective)	6.66%	10.18%	1.35%	7.23%
Initiative	1.33%	1.85%		1.97%
Persuasion skills, capacity to compromise, cooperate and negotiate, dialog-oriented, non-conflict	1.33%	7.4%	8.1%	1.31%
Intuition		0.92%		
Openness with others, tolerance, broadmindedness			9.45%	
Social sensitivity, social activity, care for the citizen		3.7%	9.45%	
Economic independence		1.85%		1.31%
Leadership skills		2.77%		2.63%
Accountability, responsiveness			2.7%	
Political model				
Oratorical skills	1.33%	0.92%		1.97%
Political loyalty	2.66%	1.85%		7.23%
Incorruptibility	5.33%	4.62%	1.35%	3.28%
Interest detachment (objectivity)	2.66%	2.77%	1.35%	3.28%
Collegiality, team spirit	12%	2.77%		16.44%
Political independence			1.35%	

Gender model	0%	0%	0%	0%
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Table no. 2. The features of the local leadership, according to the quality-based profile constructed by the local political elites themselves (Q16: “What are the first five most important qualities a municipal councilor should possess ?”)

Monolithism (*i.e.* a highly homogeneous elite, cherishing party loyalty, political experience and collegiality, team spirit especially) and the predominance of a “political model” might be reminiscent of the elites of the former regime, while a “pragmatic model” and a fragmented, heterogeneous elite group would coincide to a tradition of circulating elites and technocratic *petite bourgeoisie* during the period of state socialism. Instead, nowadays, it is the “pragmatic model” of “organizational and personal commitments”, of efficiency and effective management, that surpasses the importance of the “political model” of party and ideological loyalty: though the influence of party affiliations and ideological affinities become crucial and even indispensable, they lose their importance in the face of the localized problems the small community confronts with; problem-solving, respect for the community, competence and the capacity to pinpoint development opportunities for the town are those features that take precedence when a group establishes itself as a local political elite. Together, all assets listed render the local councilor for political leadership more commendable than his peers who may lack them. With these differences in mind, if one is to conclude if a certain form of “democratic elitism” and an “elite consciousness” are at work in the four cases discussed, inductive reasoning seems to have fallen down to a certain extent. Indeed, one may reason that, largely, the members of the four Municipal Councils bear the incipient features of perceiving themselves as a quite distinct group of notables within their respective communities. However, the “elitist exercise” is far from being a constant in the leadership outlook of the four small communities, the local elites displaying a rather “popular” image of the leading ones.

4. Concluding remarks and a tentative taxonomy

The present study advances a threefold classification of local political leadership, constructed employing mainly two explanatory trajectories, one of the being discussed at some length here: (a) the level of administrative-fiscal decentralization specific for each of the countries under scrutiny, and (2) the “legacy” of the former communist regime, expressed through the type of “elite political culture” (Jowitt, 1999). Thusly, the study proposes and favors the differentiation among three types of elites, underpinned on the specific content of elite political culture and on the set of attributions provided by a certain degree of decentralization:

- **“Predominantly elitistic”** (*e.g.* Tecuci and Targovishte), corresponding to a former “modernizing-nationalizing”, “patrimonial” communist dictatorship, followed by “elite reproduction”, and low levels of administrative decentralization and local autonomy, presently; characterized by a significant degree of “elite distinctiveness”;
- **“Democratic elitist”** (*e.g.* Česká Lípa), corresponding to a defunct “national-accommodative” communist dictatorship, followed by “elite circulation”, and high levels of decentralization and local autonomy, in the present;
- **“Predominantly democratic”** (*e.g.* Olešnica), corresponding to a former “bureaucratic-authoritarian”, “welfare” communist dictatorship, followed by “elite circulation”, a tradition of administrative decentralization, and significant levels of local autonomy, nowadays.

“Predominantly elitistic” are those elites characterized by a significant degree of “elite distinctiveness”, *i.e.* perceiving themselves, as a group or individually, as separate from the bulk of the town’s population, as part of a special, superior caste of notables and local potentates, hence prone to favor the clear gap between the rulers and the ruled; enjoying considerable levels of prestige and reputation, this type of local elites display however a sense of reluctance in effectively dealing with the community’s main problems, on the basis that power at the local level is insufficient to allow the leadership here to implement change. Therefore, it might be concluded that the “predominately elitist” local leadership corresponds to those communities presenting low degrees of decentralization and local autonomy. Additionally, the “predominantly elitistic” local elites are tightly linked to a “political” model, for their recruitment is almost exclusively intramural, all those comprising the local leadership being party members and benefiting from the otherwise indispensable support of the party, whose local branches are highly dependent of the central one. Interestingly, the “predominantly elitistic” groups are those that most closely approximate the

Aristotelian *desideratum* in their construction, conception and self-perception: they tend to adhere to an “ethical” model of the ideal local councilor, at least declaratively cherishing moral attributes that would provide them with some sort of moral superiority as prime marks of distinctiveness in respect to their constituency, to the population of their community.

“Democratic elitist” are those elites whose traits and profiles point to some form of *aurea mediocritas* between a sense of distinctiveness and the prestige they enjoy within the community, on the one hand, and the effective and meaningful dedication to their community’s developmental plans, on the other hand; as such, though they form a “caste” of notables within the town and are hardly representative to the population of the establishments they lead, in socio-demographical terms, they can act decisively for the benefit of their town due to a considerable degree of local autonomy and decentralized prerogatives, responsibilities and attributions. The local councilors of the “democratic elitist” sort remain still largely dependent on the support of the political parties, but the local parties appear independent in respect to their central branch; occasionally, “democratic elitist” type corresponds to intramural recruitment of locally-established parties, splinters or other quite localized political movements and organizations, responding to extremely specific needs and demands or describing relatively strong political localism and allowing for factionalism and decentralized, territorialized “back-bencher”-ism. In addition, the “democratic elitist” groups overlaps on a rather “pragmatic” or “technocratic” model of the local councilor, as the most cherished attributes of the leadership come to be the professionalism of the local leadership, its capacity in decision-making, policy designing and problem-solving.

“Predominantly democratic” are those elites featuring a sense of identification with the masses, with the ordinary citizens of the community they happen to represent temporarily, a dominating “social sensitivity” that would determine their propensity towards social security and welfare strategies in local leadership; this type of local elites are juxtaposed to a tradition of decentralization and devolution mechanisms that permit them to identify and to implement policies responding to the needs of the town. The “predominantly democratic” type of local elites is probably the closest to the population it represents in terms of passive representation, for it may include persons of lower education, or people previously involved in directly advocating for the interests of some segments in the community (pupils, women, unemployed, workers, etc.). These local leaders are usually quite familiar to the problems their town confronts with, being especially concerned with social issues (e.g. unemployment, social benefits, housing, etc.). The methods of recruiting elites in this context are highly inclusive, but the actual specificity of these elites is the extramural fashion in which they are selected, as their political affiliation is futile if existent; the role of the party in the recruitment process, either local or central branches, is virtually insignificant. Consequently, the “predominantly democratic” local elites correspond to rather “pragmatic” and “moral” profiles, while the “political” model is virtually absent in their case.

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